SCOTTSDALE - MEN'S RETREAT
SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 1996
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, CHICAGO
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR

Mark 2:18-22

7:1-8

A MATTER OF VALUE

THE VALUE OF TRADITION

YOU KNOW THE STORY OF MARK TWAIN'S OBITUARY I AM SURE. HE WAS LECTURING IN ENGLAND WHEN A NEWSPAPER BACK IN AMERICA REPORTED THAT THE AUTHOR HAD DIED. WHEN TWAIN HEARD ABOUT IT HE WIRED THE NEWSPAPER: "REPORTS OF MY DEMISE ARE A BIT PREMATURE."

SO, IT SEEMS TO ME THAT EVERY WEEK SOMEONE IS PREDICTING, REPORTING WITH CONFIDENCE, THE DEMISE OF THE MAINLINE CHURCHES, AND PARTICULARLY THE

2017

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH. WE ARE DEFINITIVELY, QUINTESSENTIALLY MAINLINE. AND WE ARE STUDIED MORE, THERE IS MORE HANDWRINGING ABOUT US -- FROM INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE CHURCH, WE TALK MORE AND FIGHT MORE ABOUT WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE OUGHT TO BE AND WHAT IN THE WORLD AILS US, AND WHATEVER ARE WE GOING TO DO. NO CHURCH SEEMS TO HAVE SUCH CONFLICTED FEELINGS ABOUT ITS NATIONAL STAFF, NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM MISSION: NO CHURCH HAS AS MANY STRONG, INTERNAL ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS WITH THEIR OWN PROGRAMS, CONSTITUENCIES AND FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE NEWSPAPERS CLAIMING TO BE TELLING THE TRUTH ABOUT THE WHOLE CHURCH.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT MAINLINE MEANS AND WHERE THE TERM CAME FROM? IT IS A RAILROAD TERM, A PENNSYLVANIA RAILROAD TERM TO BE PRECISE. THAT FACT ALONE SHOULD GIVE US PAUSE. MAINLINE REFERS TO THE LARGE, RAIL ARTERY OUT OF PHILADELPHIA, HEADED WEST FOR THE ALLEGHENY MOUNTAINS, PITTSBURGH AND CHICAGO. ALONG THOSE TRACKS TOWNS GREW UP IN THE HALCYON DAYS OF RAILROADING, TOWNS CONNECTED TO PHILADELPHIA BY THE RAILROAD. THEY BECAME KNOWN AS THE MAINLINE, TOO. Bryn Mawr, Swarthmore, Haverford, Radnor, Bala Cynwyd..

I'M NEVER QUITE SURE HOW FAR WE OUGHT TO GO WITH THIS METAPHOR, BECAUSE FOR ONE REASON OR ANOTHER -- MOSTLY ITS INABILITY, OR REFUSAL EVEN TO TRY, TO

CHANGE AND LIVE IN A NEW FUTURE CHARACTERIZED BY INTERSTATE HIGHWAYS AND JET ENGINES, THE PENNSYLVANIA RAILROAD BEGAN A SLOW, STEADY DECLINE, MERGED WITH THE NEW YORK CENTRAL AND BECAME THE PENN CENTRAL WHICH CONTINUED THE STEADY DECLINE -- UNTIL THE WHOLE PROJECT WAS ABANDONED AND ABSORBED INTO AMTRAK -- WHICH NOT LONG AGO JUST CANCELLED THE LAST PASSENGER TRAIN FROM NEW YORK TO CHICAGO - THE BROADWAY LIMITED - WHICH FOR RAILROAD BUFFS IS THE EQUIVALENT OF THE CLOSING DOWN OF PEACHTREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH -- ATLANTA, FOR LACK OF MEMBERS.

WELL -- MAYBE WE SHOULD LISTEN TO THE SOCIOLOGISTS AND STOP USING THE TERM MAINLINE AND EMPLOYEE MAINSTREAM INSTEAD.

WHATEVER THE TERM, THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IS IT.

IN THEIR NEW BOOK, VITAL SIGNS, MILTON ~~COULTER~~ CARTER, JOHN MUDGE AND LOUIS WEEKS DEFINE MAINSTREAM PROTESTANTISM AS THE FOLLOWING COMMUNIONS:

AMERICAN BAPTISTS

CHRISTIAN (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST)

EPISCOPAL

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

REFORMED CHURCH

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

UNITED METHODIST

THOSE CHURCHES ARE, SAY THE AUTHORS, COUNCILLOR -- THEY BELONG TO THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES, WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES AND ARE ECUMENICAL IN OUTLOOK.

"THEY HAVE EXERCISED A DOMINANT INFLUENCE ON AMERICAN CULTURE BECAUSE OF THEIR SIZE -- AND THEIR ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE OF THEIR MEMBERS."

THEOLOGICALLY -- THESE CHURCHES SHARE A PERSPECTIVE THAT APPRECIATES THE TENSIONS AND THE DIVERSITY WITHIN THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL: THE AUTHORS SAY THAT IN THEIR BETTER MOMENTS THESE CHURCHES "HAVE REFUSED TO COLLAPSE THESE

TENSIONS, AVOIDED RIGIDITY IN DOCTRINE ..." HAVE BEEN A MODERATE, CENTRIST INFLUENCE IN AMERICAN RELIGION AND CULTURE.

AND THESE CHURCHES HAVE "ACCEPTED TRUSTEESHIP FOR SOCIETY AND USED THEIR POWER AND RESOURCES TO TRY TO SHAPE AMERICAN SOCIETY AND THE WORLD TOWARD WHAT THEY DEEMED TO BE CONSTRUCTIVE ENDS."

FINALLY -- THOSE CHURCHES, WITH A FEW OCCASIONAL EXCEPTIONS, HAVE BEEN DECLINING -- FIRST IN RELATIVE SIZE TO THE REST OF THE POPULATION, AND THEN IN REAL NUMBERS. THE SIMPLE, UNVARNISHED TRUTH IS THAT THERE ARE 25 PERCENT FEWER PRESBYTERIANS -- OR, MORE ACCURATELY,

MEMBERS OF PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES (BECAUSE THERE IS SOME EVIDENCE THAT THERE ARE AS MANY, IF NOT MORE OF US THAN EVER: IT'S JUST THAT FEWER OF US ARE JOINING AND BELONGING TO LOCAL CONGREGATIONS. BUT THE FACT IS THAT WE HAVE BEEN LOSING MEMBERS FOR 30 YEARS AND THAT WE ARE CHEERED WHEN THE ANNUAL LOSS IS NOT AS BIG AS LAST YEARS.

OF COURSE WE ARE NOT DECLINING EVERYWHERE. THIS CONGREGATION ISN'T LOSING MANY MEMBERS. PEOPLE DO NOT STAY AWAY FROM THIS CHURCH BECAUSE OF SOMETHING SOMEONE SAID AT A CONFERENCE IN MINNEAPOLIS, OR BECAUSE OF A $10,000 GRANT THE CHURCH MADE TO ANGELLA DAVIS 27 YEARS AGO, OR BECAUSE OF POLICIES AT

CHURCH HEADQUARTERS. THIS CONGREGATION I SENSE ISN'T LOSING MEMBERS.

Why - good leadership history pride & tradition is known

BUT WHAT IS HAPPENING IS THAT WE ARE SPENDING A LOT OF OUR ENERGY AND INTELLIGENCE AND CREATIVITY TRYING TO FIND WHOSE FAULT IT IS: WHOSE TO BLAME FOR OUR DEMISE. WE ARE DOING A MONUMENTAL AMOUNT OF HAND WRINGING AND FINGER POINTING.

AND IN THE MIDST OF ALL THIS I'D LIKE TO OFFER A COUNTER PROPOSAL: NAMELY THAT THE MAINLINE CHURCHES ARE A VERY PRECIOUS PART OF THIS CULTURE; THAT IT WOULD BE AN INCALCULABLE LOSS IF THEY SHOULD DISAPPEAR; THAT THERE IS MUCH ABOUT THEM THAT IS VITAL AND ALIVE AND THAT WHILE SOME OF WHAT WE HAVE

BECOME ACCUSTOMED TO BY WAY OF STRUCTURE MAY DISAPPEAR, SOMETHING NEW WILL BE BORN AND THE CHURCHES WILL BE REINVENTED.

I HAZARD THAT PROPOSAL BECAUSE I DO NOT BELIEVE WE ARE IN THIS BY OURSELVES. I BELIEVE THE SPIRIT CREATES THE CHURCH AND THAT WHERE THERE ARE FAITHFUL MEN AND WOMEN WILING TO BE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS CHRIST THE CHURCH WILL LIVE.

AND I WOULD ARGUE THAT CRITICAL TO THE ENTIRE ENTERPRISE; THE REBIRTH OF MAINLINE CHURCHES -- IS THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.).

ONE OF THE SCENARIOS PUT FORWARD BY THE SCHOLARS IS THAT DENOMINATIONS THEMSELVES ARE AN ANACHRONISM AND,

HAVING SERVED THEIR PURPOSES, NOW NEED TO FADE AWAY. I DO BELIEVE THAT OUR FUTURE MUST BE AN ECUMENICAL FUTURE: THAT THERE IS A ONENESS AND UNITY ABOUT THE CHURCH THAT COMPELS US TO BE TOGETHER. BUT I ALSO BELIEVE THAT THE RICH TAPESTRY OF THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH WE SAY WE BELIEVE IN WHEN WE RECITE THE APOSTLES' CREED, NEEDS ITS INDIVIDUAL TRADITIONS TO BE STRONG AND TO RETAIN THEIR IDENTITY.

FOR THE RECORD, I'M A PRESBYTERIAN BECAUSE MY PARENTS WERE. I WAS BAPTIZED IN A PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ATTENDED SUNDAY SCHOOL, WAS CONFIRMED, PARTICIPATED IN YOUTH FELLOWSHIP AND

CHURCH CAMP. PRESBYTERIANISM IS ALMOST AS DEEPLY A PART OF WHO I AM AS MY NAME.

BUT I AM ALSO A PRESBYTERIAN BECAUSE I CHOSE TO BE. WHEN I LEFT THE BASIC STRUCTURES OF LIFE -- FAMILY AND COMMUNITY -- I ALSO LEFT MY CHURCH FOR A WHILE AND WANDERED AROUND IN THE WILDERNESS, TRYING TO DECIDE WHO I WAS AND WHO I WANTED TO BE. AND I DISCOVERED WHAT MANY OF US DISCOVER IN THAT PARTICULAR WILDERNESS, NAMELY THAT WHILE OUR FAMILY MAY NOT BE THE MOST WONDERFUL FAMILY IN THE WORLD, IT IS OUR FAMILY AND THERE IS MUCH ABOUT IT THAT IS ADMIRABLE. AND SO WITH MY CHURCH; FROM THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN, IT APPEARED

DIFFERENT, STRONGER, MORE ATTRACTIVE THAN IT DID FROM THE INSIDE LOOKING OUT, NOT UNLIKE NOAH'S ARK, I SUPPOSE, TO WHICH THE CHURCH IS OFTEN LIKENED AND ABOUT WHICH SOMEONE QUIPPED THAT THE STENCH INSIDE IS SOMETIMES SO BAD THAT LEAVING SOUNDS LIKE A GOOD IDEA, EXCEPT FOR THE FACT THAT THERE IS A STORM OUTSIDE AND A PERSON COULD EASILY DROWN.

IN ANY EVENT, AFTER A SERIOUS FLIRTATION WITH ANOTHER ECCLESIASTICAL TRADITION AND AN EVEN MORE SERIOUS CONSIDERATION OF THE MOST POLITICALLY CORRECT OPTION -- THE TIME BEING THE 1960S -- NAMELY A COMPLETE REJECTION OF INSTITUTIONAL RELIGION AS HYPOCRITICAL

AND OPPRESSIVE, I CAME BACK TO WHERE I HAD STARTED, RECLAIMED MY TRADITION, OR RATHER CLAIMED IT AUTHENTICALLY FOR MYSELF, AND ASKED THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IF IT WOULD HAVE ME.

IN JUNE OF 1963 I WAS HOME AGAIN, FOR THE FIRST TIME, NOW A MINISTER OF WORD AND SACRAMENT AND THE SYMBOL OF THAT DECISION -- MY DECISION TO BE A PRESBYTERIAN AND THE PRESBYTERIANS TO ALLOW ME IN -- (IS ([redacted]M) TWO WHITE STRIPS OF CLOTH I WEAR ON SUNDAY.) NOT ALL PRESBYTERIAN MINISTERS WEAR THEM, BY THE WAY. (BUT FOURTH CHURCH CLERGY ALWAYS HAVE, AND I ALWAYS HAVE.) THEY ARE SOMETIMES CALLED "PREACHING BANDS,"

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OR "GENEVA TABS." THEY ARE SAID TO REPRESENT THE TWO FOUNDATIONS OF CALVINISM -- THE LAW AND THE GRACE OF GOD. I DON'T KNOW ABOUT THAT. WHAT THEY MEAN TO ME IS GENEVA, WHERE THIS CHURCH, THIS TRADITION, MY FAMILY -- THAT I AM GRATEFUL AND PROUD TO NUMBER MY SELF AMONG -- BEGAN. GENEVA TABS REMIND ME WEEKLY OF WHO I AM AND OF THIS UNIQUE RELIGIOUS TRADITION CALLED REFORMED/PRESBYTERIAN WHICH I CLAIM AS MY OWN.

AND YET, EVEN THAT -- THAT PERSONAL LOYALTY TO A PARTICULAR RELIGIOUS TRADITION -- IS A BIT OF AN ANACHRONISM, IS IT NOT?

BRAND LOYALTY, DENOMINATIONAL ORIENTATION, DOES NOT RANK VERY HIGH WHEN PEOPLE CHOOSE A CHURCH. ASK A GROUP OF PRESBYTERIANS ANYWHERE WHY THEY ARE MEMBERS OF A PARTICULAR CONGREGATION AND THEY WILL SAY THINGS LIKE, "IT'S CLOSE; WE LIKE THE MUSIC, THE CHILDREN'S PROGRAM, THE PREACHING, THE PEOPLE, THE BUILDING; MY WIFE OR HUSBAND OR PARENTS MAKE ME GO." ALMOST NO ONE SAYS, "I BELONG BECAUSE IT'S PRESBYTERIAN." THE SAME IS TRUE FOR METHODISTS, UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST AND TO AN EXTENT, EPISCOPALIANS.

INTERESTINGLY, DENOMINATIONS ORIGINALLY SERVED TO PRESERVE ETHNIC OR

NATIONAL IDENTITY FOR IMMIGRANTS TO THE NEW WORLD. AS NATIONAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY RECEDED, DENOMINATIONS IN THIS CULTURE TOOK ON A NEW FUNCTION. IN 1929 H. RICHARD NIEBUHR WROTE A CLASSIC STUDY CALLED "THE SOCIAL SOURCES OF DENOMINATIONALISM" WHICH OBSERVED THAT THERE WAS A RELIGIOUS SOCIAL HIERARCHY. VANCE PACKARD WROTE ABOUT IT IN HIS FAMOUS 1959 BOOK THE STATUS SEEKERS. HE REFERRED TO "THE LONG ROAD FROM PENTECOSTAL TO EPISCOPAL." BASED ON INCOME, PEOPLE MIGHT MOVE FROM PENTECOSTAL TO BAPTIST TO METHODIST TO PRESBYTERIAN TO EPISCOPAL, THE TOP OF THE HEAP ECONOMICALLY.

BUT EVEN THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF DENOMINATIONS IS NOW GONE. THE OLD SOCIAL HIERARCHY IS GONE. WADE CLARK ROOF AND WILLIAM MCKINNEY ARE TWO SOCIOLOGISTS WHO STUDY RELIGION. IN THEIR WIDELY READ AMERICAN MAINLINE RELIGIONS THEY DESCRIBE OUR NUMERICAL DECLINE AND THEN INCLUDE A HILARIOUS WALL STREET JOURNAL FEATURE ARTICLE WRITTEN BY JACK CASHILL.

"MY STRATEGY IS TO CONSOLIDATE THE VARIOUS NAME BRANDS, EVEN THE STRONG, FLAGSHIP BRANDS LIKE SOUTHERN BAPTIST, INTO ONE IDENTIFIABLE EXXON-LIKE ENTITY. THE TARGET AUDIENCE

> HERE IS MOM, DAD, BUTCH AND SIS -- SOLID SUBURBAN AMERICANS WHO WANT A LITTLE GOD IN THEIR LIFE AND A PLACE TO GO BEFORE BRUNCH. AND, AFTER TEST-MARKETING VARIOUS POSSIBILITIES, I HAVE DECIDED ON THE NAME MIDDLE AMERICAN CHRISTIAN CHURCH, OR MACCHURCH FOR AD PURPOSES. [JACK CASHILL, WALL STREET JOURNAL, 7/30/85, IN ROOF AND MCKINNEY, P. 229]

CASHILL, AN ADVERTISING EXECUTIVE, CREATED A MARKETING PLAN FOR REVITALIZING THE MAJOR RELIGIOUS FAITHS.

JUDAISM, HE SAID, DEFINITELY NEEDS A NEW PRODUCT FOR BABY BOOMERS; FOR ROMAN CATHOLICS A MARKET-SEGMENTATION APPROACH: "'RC LIGHT' FOR LIBERALS, 'RC CLASSIC' FOR TRADITIONALISTS, 'RC FREE' FOR THOSE INTERESTED IN LIBERATION THEOLOGY." PROTESTANTISM PRESENTS SPECIAL PROBLEMS: INDIVIDUAL CHURCHES WILL HAVE TO UNDERSTAND THAT THERE IS ONLY SO MUCH THEOLOGICAL SHELF SPACE, THAT PRODUCT DIFFERENTIATION IS NOT VIABLE FOR GO-AS-YOU-PLEASE PROTESTANTS; THUS THE MIDDLE AMERICAN CHRISTIAN CHURCH OR "MACCHURCH." [IBID]

PRODUCT DIFFERENTIATION IS NOT VERY IMPORTANT. IT NEVER REALLY WAS INTENDED

TO BE. THE THEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PRESBYTERIANS, METHODISTS, LUTHERANS, UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, BAPTISTS ARE MINIMAL. WE DIFFER IN THE WAY WE GO ABOUT BEING A CHURCH BUT THERE ARE NO SUBSTANTIVE DIFFERENCES IN OUR BELIEFS. THE SAME IS TRUE BETWEEN PROTESTANTS AND CATHOLICS. THE FUNDAMENTALS ARE THE SAME. WE BELIEVE IN GOD THE CREATOR, AND JESUS CHRIST AS GOD'S INCARNATION, AND THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT IN THE WORLD, AND THE CHRISTIAN VOCATION TO BE FAITHFUL AND TO LIVE IN THE LOVE OF CHRIST.

SO, WHEN SOMEONE SAYS, "TELL ME WHAT PRESBYTERIANS BELIEVE," THE ANSWER

IS THE SAME THINGS AS METHODISTS OR BAPTISTS OR CATHOLICS BELIEVE: THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST. OUR OWN NEW MEMBER STATISTICS INDICATE THAT PRODUCT DIFFERENTIATION IS NO LONGER VERY IMPORTANT AT ALL: ONLY ONE IN FIVE, WERE PRESBYTERIANS.

WHAT DOES DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN CHURCHES IS THE ETHOS, THE STYLE, THE MISSION PRIORITIES, AND THE MATTER OF AUTHORITY -- WHO HAS IT AND HOW IT IS EXERCISED. AND SO BEAR WITH ME AS WE THINK ABOUT WHO WE ARE.

WE BEGAN IN THE MIDDLE OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY, ABOUT THIRTY YEARS

AFTER MARTIN LUTHER CHALLENGED THE AUTHORITY OF THE ROMAN CHURCH AND STARTED THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION. JOHN CALVIN WAS A FRENCH LAWYER WHO WAS INTERESTED IN REFORMATION THINKING, WAS EXILED FROM FRANCE, SETTLED IN GENEVA, SWITZERLAND, WROTE ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT THEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL WORKS EVER PRODUCED, THE INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION, BECAME A REFORMED PASTOR, AND WAS PERSUADED BY THE GENEVA POLITICAL POWERS TO SETTLE THERE AND TO ORGANIZE THE CHURCH AND THE CITY ACCORDING TO THE NEW PRINCIPLES HE HAD BEEN WRITING ABOUT. SO HE DID AND THE RESULT WAS A NEW WAY OF BEING A CHURCH.

Pardon the term - C was one of the greatest Re-Imaginers of all time

CALVIN IMAGINED A CHURCH WHOSE AUTHORITY WAS NOT IN ITS HIERARCHY BUT ITS PEOPLE. THAT WAS A REVOLUTIONARY IDEA, A DANGEROUS AND RADICAL IDEA IN THE POLITICAL ARENA. CALVIN SAID THAT NOT ONLY DOES THE INDIVIDUAL HAVE THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE PROCESS BY WHICH AUTHORITY IS EXERCISED, BOTH ECCLESIASTICAL AND CIVIL, NO AUTHORITY HAS THE RIGHT TO COERCE THE INDIVIDUAL'S CONSCIENCE. GOD ALONE IS THE LORD OF THE CONSCIENCE.

AND FURTHERMORE, SAID CALVIN, THE INDIVIDUAL WHO HAS RIGHTS AND AUTHORITY NEEDS TO BE EDUCATED, TO BE ABLE TO READ AND REASON AND SO IT IS ONE OF THE

PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITIES OF CIVIL AUTHORITY, NOT JUST WEALTHY FAMILIES, TO EDUCATE THE YOUNG.

AND, HE SAID, TRUTH LEADS TO GOODNESS; RELIGIOUS FAITH IS TO BE EXPRESSED, NOT JUST IN PERSONAL MORALITY AND PIETY, BUT IN RESPONSIBLE AND COMPASSIONATE AND JUST POLITICAL ACTION.

AND SO THERE IS A PRESBYTERIAN ETHOS, A STYLE, A WAY OF BEING A CHURCH.

AUTHORITY HERE IS NOT IN THE HIERARCHY, BUT THE PEOPLE WHO ELECT REPRESENTATIVES CALLED ELDERS. A PRESBYTERIAN PARTICULAR IS TO BE VERY

SUSPICIOUS OF AUTHORITY WHICH IS NOT REPRESENTATIVE. A MINISTER CAN'T MAKE MANY DECISIONS WITHOUT THE SESSION. WE HAVE NO BISHOPS AND WE GET NERVOUS WHEN ANYONE STARTS ACTING LIKE ONE. WE CALL OUR HIGHEST OFFICERS MODERATOR AND CLERK, NOT TERRIBLY EXALTED TITLES.

AND THIS MATTER OF CONSCIENCE. THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF JOHN CALVIN HAVE BEEN EVERYWHERE ON THE SIDE OF LIBERTY IN THE POLITICAL ARENA. IT WAS AN IMPORTANT MOMENT FOR ME WHEN IN FRESHMAN GOVERNMENT I HAD TO READ JOHN CALVIN ON THE PRINCIPLES OF LIBERTY. JOHN KNOX, A DISCIPLE OF CALVIN, TOOK PRESBYTERIANISM BACK TO SCOTLAND AND FOMENTED A

REVOLUTION WHICH RESULTED IN FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND CONSCIENCE. PRESBYTERIANS WERE HERE, ON THIS CONTINENT, IN 1640 AND BY THE TIME OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION HAD STRONGLY SIDED WITH THE PATRIOT CAUSE. WILLIAM PITT, ON THE FLOOR OF PARLIAMENT, CALLED THE SKIRMISH IN THE COLONIES "THE PRESBYTERIAN REVOLT."

IN MAY OF 1789 - THIRTEEN YEARS AFTER THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE WAS SIGNED, THIRTY-FOUR PRESBYTERIANS MET IN PHILADELPHIA AND DECIDED THAT THEY WERE A NATIONAL ORGANIZATION... THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH. THEY REPRESENTED 420 CONGREGATIONS SCATTERED THROUGHOUT THE NEW NATION AND ITS FRONTIER.

Together they were the largest, best educated, most orderly church in the new world. They had a strong sense that they were a part of the new era in world history which was coming to pass with the birth of the American Republic, and they had important contributions to make. They had been there from the beginning. Two Presbyterian churches, established in 1640, were already nearly 150 years old in 1789.

The group that met in Philadelphia in 1789 understood that it was time to think anew. The presiding officer was John Witherspoon, President of the College of New Jersey at Princeton.

THIRTEEN YEARS EARLIER HE HAD SIGNED HIS NAME TO THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, JUST TWO BLOCKS DOWN THE STREET, THE ONLY CLERGYMAN TO DO SO. TO SHOW HIS SUPPORT OF THE NEW SOCIETY, WITHERSPOON AND SEVERAL OF THE OTHERS HAD STOPPED WEARING A WIG IN 1776.

THEY ELECTED JOHN ROGERS, ONE OF THEIR OWN, TO BE MODERATOR. AND THEN THE PRESBYTERIANS WENT TO WORK. THEY APPOINTED A FEW MISSIONARIES TO ORGANIZE CHURCHES ON THE FRONTIER: THEY COMMISSIONED SEVERAL REPRESENTATIVES TO OPEN DISCUSSIONS WITH OTHER CHRISTIAN CHURCHES, THEY HAD A FIERCE ARGUMENT ABOUT A HYMNAL, THEY DISCUSSED THE

SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES THEY HAD FOUNDED AND THEY COMPOSED A LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, GEORGE WASHINGTON. CALVINISTS THAT THEY WERE, THEY PRESUMED NOT ONLY TO SPEAK TO THEIR CONGREGATIONS, THEY SPOKE FOR THE CHURCH TO THE WORLD, ALWAYS VERY RISKY BUSINESS. "WE OUGHT NOT TO FORGET OUR CONSEQUENCE IN THE REPUBLIC," THEY SAID. ~~IT IS ONE OF OUR TRADITIONS.~~

IT IS ONE OF OUR TRADITIONS. ~~JOHN~~ CALVIN AND JOHN KNOX WERE DISSENTERS: ~~THEY DID NOT LIVE EASILY WITH~~ THE ESTAB~~LISHMENT.~~ ONE OF OUR EARLIEST PREACHERS WAS THROWN IN JAIL FOR PREACHING IN NEW YORK WITHOUT A LICENSE AND HIS TRIAL WAS A LANDMARK IN THE SLOW

MOVEMENT TOWARD RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE NEW WORLD. ELIJAH [redacted] LOVEJOY WAS A PRESBYTERIAN EDITOR OF A ST. LOUIS NEWSPAPER BURNED OUT BY A PRO-SLAVERY MOB AND LATER KILLED BY ANOTHER MOB IN ALTON, ILLINOIS FOR HIS ANTI-SLAVERY EDITORIALIZING. HENRY VANDYKE RISKED HIS PRESTIGE AND REPUTATION BY VOICING A LONELY AND VERY UNPOPULAR PROTEST AGAINST THE SPANISH AMERICAN WAR. WILLIAM SLOANE COFFIN DID THE SAME DURING VIET NAM, AND NO PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER MY AGE WAS NOT ASKED AT LEAST ONCE BY A NERVOUS [redacted] PULPIT COMMITTEE DURING THE SIXTIES IF WE WOULD EVEN ENGAGE IN CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE. (THERE IS NO WAY TO

BE A PRESBYTERIAN BY THE WAY AND SAY "NO" TO THAT QUESTION.)

YOU WILL FIND THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH PRESSING FOR PERSONAL FREEDOM AND LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE -- ALL THE WAY ALONG THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM. WE WERE DEEPLY INVOLVED IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT; WE ARE HISTORICALLY OPPOSED TO ANY GOVERNMENT COERCION OF CONSCIENCE; WE ARE FOR THE DIGNITY AND RIGHTS OF INDIVIDUALS TO DETERMINE THEIR OWN DESTINY.

But EQUALLY IMPORTANT AS OUR INSISTENCE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE SANCTITY OF THE INDIVIDUAL CONSCIENCE -- HAS BEEN THE HONORING, WITHIN OUR

PRESBYTERIAN TRADITION OF THE DELIBERATIVE PROCESS.

BASIC TO OUR NOTION OF THE CHURCH IS THE IDEA THAT PEOPLE OF CONVICTION AND FAITH CAN TALK WITH ONE ANOTHER, ESTABLISH CONSENSUS AND FIND WAYS TO LIVE TOGETHER IN SPITE OF FAIRLY SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES OF OPINION. WE BELIEVE THAT THE BODY, THE CHURCH, NEEDS THAT DELIBERATIVE PROCESS, THAT INTERNAL DIALOGUE OR DISCOURSE, IN ORDER TO KNOW THE MIND OF GOD. WE BELIEVE THAT WE HAVE BETTER AND MORE RELIABLE ACCESS TO THE SPIRIT IN DIALOGUE, THAN WE DO ALONE. IN FACT, WE PRESBYTERIANS HAVE A STRONG SUSPICION THAT THE PROCESS OF CIVIL DISCOURSE, IS A CORRECTIVE TO A

STRIDENT INDIVIDUALISM THAT CLAIMS THAT IT KNOWS THE WHOLE TRUTH AND EVERYBODY ELSE IS WRONG.

SOMETIMES, OF COURSE, WE HAVE KNOWN THIS BETTER IN THEORY THAN IN BEHAVIOR. SOMEONE SAID -- I THINK IT WAS DURING ONE OF SCOTLANDS BLOODY BATTLES WITH ENGLAND -- THAT THERE IS NOTHING SO FEARSOME AS ONE LONE CALVINIST IN POSSESSION OF THE TRUTH. AND IT WAS OLIVER CROMWELL WHO SAID TO A PRESBYTERIAN CRITIC: "DID YOU EVERY CONSIDER, BY THE BOWELS OF CHRIST, THAT YOU MAY BE WRONG?"

AND IN POINT OF FACT, DELIBERATIVE PROCESS AND CIVIL DISCOURSE AND CONSENSUS BUILDING IS NOT VERY POPULAR

TODAY. ALL THE PUNDITS ARE ASTONISHED AT THE ABSENCE OF CIVILITY, THE AD HOMINEM ATTACKS, THE PERSONAL DISDAIN AND THE IDEOLOGICAL RANCOR THAT CHARACTERIZED THE IOWA AND NEW HAMPSHIRE PRIMARIES.

IN A FINE NEW BOOK, SANFRANCISCO SEMINARY ~~PRESIDENT~~ Prof. JACK ROGERS IDENTIFIES IDEOLOGY AS A ONE-SIDED WAY OF THINKING AND CONCLUDES THAT ABOUT TWENTY-FIVE PERCENT OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH CURRENTLY THINKS IDEOLOGICALLY, I.E. I AM ABSOLUTELY RIGHT, YOU ARE ABSOLUTELY WRONG AND THEREFORE THERE ISN'T A WHOLE LOT FOR US TO TALK ABOUT. INSTEAD, ~~ONLY~~ MY RHETORICAL ENERGY IS FOR THE PURPOSE OF CONVINCING YOU EITHER TO

COME OVER TO MY SIDE OR TO LEAVE THE FAMILY. FIFTEEN PERCENT OF THE PEOPLE ON THE FAR RIGHT THINK LIKE THIS, HE SAYS, TEN PERCENT ON THE FAR LEFT.

THAT LEAVES 75 PERCENT OF US IN THE CENTER, THE CRITICAL CENTER. OUR GLORY AS A CHURCH ROGERS SAYS HAS BEEN OUR ABILITY TO BALANCE CONVICTION AND CIVILITY, TO AVOID A RIGIDITY THAT ALLOWS LITTLE DIFFERENCE OF OPINION AND A RESPECT, ALWAYS, FOR THE PROCESS OF TALKING WITH ONE ANOTHER.

PRESBYTERIAN ETHICIST DON SHRIVER, FORMER PRESIDENT OF UNION SEMINARY, NEW YORK CITY, SAID THAT THE DELIBERATIVE PROCESS, CONSENSUS OUT OF DIALOGUE -- IS THE ONLY WAY THE CHURCH CAN HOLD

TOGETHER AS IT FACES THE TORTUROUSLY DIFFICULT ISSUES OF ABORTION FOR INSTANCE, IN WHICH THE CONVERSATION TYPICALLY IS CARRIED OUT AS PEOPLE SHOUT SOUND-BITE INVECTIVES AT ONE ANOTHER THROUGH BULL HORNS. NOT TO MENTION HOMOSEXUALITY, WHICH I THINK I WON'T.

AND EDUCATION: THE MAJORITY OF THE COLLEGES IN THE COLONIES AND POST-COLONIAL PERIOD WERE STARTED BY PRESBYTERIANS AND OTHER REFORMED CHURCHES; AND ACROSS THE COUNTRY, SOME SIXTY SCHOOLS, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES TODAY ARE STILL RELATED TO THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH. LAKE FOREST, MILIKIN, MONMOUTH IN ILLINOIS, MENAUL IN ALBUQUERQUE, COOKE COLLEGE IN TEMPE,

ROCKY MOUNTAIN IN BILLINGS, TRINITY IN SAN ANTONIO.

ONE OF OUR VERY DISTINGUISHED THEOLOGIANS, EDWARD FARLEY, SAYS,

> "IF WE HAVE A GENIUS IT IS NOT SO MUCH SOME DISTINCTIVE DEPOSIT OF DOCTRINE AS IT IS A WAY OF TRANSCENDING OUR DEPOSITED TRADITIONS UNDER THE CONSTANT NAGGING PRESSURE OF THE QUESTION OF TRUTH." [THE PRESBYTERIAN PREDICAMENT, P. 52]

BECAUSE WE BELIEVE SO PASSIONATELY IN THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD AND THE HUMAN CONSCIENCE, WE BELIEVE THE QUESTION OF

TRUTH IS AN OPEN ONE AND THAT WE ARE CALLED TO SEEK THE TRUTH WITH OUR MINDS AND HEARTS AND SPIRITS. WE BELIEVE THAT SCIENCE AND ACADEMIC INQUIRY ARE HOLY PURSUITS, NEVER, NEVER THE ENEMY OF RELIGION.

OUR HERITAGE:

- INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN CHURCH AND WORLD;

- THE PURSUIT OF TRUTH AND THE LIFE OF THE MIND. COMMITMENT TO EDUCATION

- COMMITMENT TO THE LIFE OF FAITH IN THE WORLD.

I BELIEVE THIS IS A PRECIOUS AND IMPORTANT INHERITANCE AND THAT THE LIFE OF THE WORLD, THE NATION, THE COMMUNITY, WOULD BE IMMEASURABLY POORER WITHOUT THEM. YOU WILL NOT HEAR MUCH ABOUT THAT KIND OF RELIGION ON THE TELEVISION. HOW TRAGIC IF MINDLESS PIETY, NOT OPEN TO NEW TRUTH, WERE ALL THE CULTURE EVER HEARD ABOUT CHRISTIANITY.

FARLEY THINKS, AND I BELIEVE, THAT THE PHRASE THAT BEST DESCRIBES US IN "CRITICAL MODERNISM."

WE ACCEPT SCIENCE -- SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY, NOT AS THE ONLY ARBITER OF TRUTH, BUT AS A GIFT OF GOD AND A HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY.

WE ARE NOT BIBLICAL LITERALISTS. WE BELIEVE IT IS CRITICALLY IMPORTANT TO ENGAGE IN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLE. WE SHOULDN'T HIDE THAT OR BE ASHAMED OF IT. WE SHOULD CELEBRATE IT AND TEACH OUR CHILDREN THAT THE TRUTH OF SCRIPTURE IS ACCESSIBLE TO THE HUMAN INTELLECT WHEN IT IS DOING WHAT IT DOES BEST -- CHALLENGE, PROBE, QUESTION.

AND WE ARE "MODERNISTS," A WORD OFTEN USED AS A CRITICISM. WE LIVE IN

Church just put in each pkt for 80's

THIS WORLD. OUR HEARTS AND MINDS AND BODIES BELONG TO GOD, BUT WE LIVE IN THE 1990S, AND FRANKLY WE ARE FAR MORE CONCERNED ABOUT THE FUTURE THAN WE ARE ABOUT THE PAST -- THE WORLD WE ARE GIVING TO OUR CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN, THAN THE WORLD OF OUR GRANDPARENTS.

to p 48?

AND I'M A PRESBYTERIAN BECAUSE I CHOOSE TO STAND IN A LINE OF OTHERS WHO HAVE FAITHFULLY WITNESSED TO GOD'S LOVE AND GRACE IN JESUS CHRIST AND THE CONSEQUENT SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IMPERATIVES.

I'M A PRESBYTERIAN BECAUSE OF THE WITNESS OF MY CHURCH IN THE WORLD. I AM A MEMBER OF OUR CHURCH'S BOARD OF PENSIONS. WE MET LA[redacted]EEK IN CALIFORNIA AND WHILE THERE VISITED A RETIREMENT FACILITY FOR MISSION PERSONNEL AT DUARTE. WE OWN THE FACILITY BECAUSE RETIRED MISSIONARIES DON'T HAVE MUCH OF ANYTHING: NO HOME, NO EQUITY, OFTEN NO FURNITURE AND NO SAVINGS. I WAS DEEPLY TOUCHED.

I MET AND TALKED WITH A WOMAN WHO WITH HER HUSBAND HAD TAUGHT FOR FORTY YEARS AT THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN BEIRUT, A VERY CRITICAL UNIVERSITY STARTED BY HER HUSBAND'S GREAT-

GRANDFATHER, A PRESBYTERIAN MISSIONARY IN THE 1860s. HER HUSBAND WAS A FOURTH GENERATION PRESBYTERIAN MISSION WORKER TO TEACH AT AMERICAN UNIVERSITY. (CHICAGO BULLS' GUARD STEVE KERR WHO PLAYED, I BELIEVE, FOR ARIZONA, IS THE SON OF THE DISTINGUISHED PRESIDENT OF AMERICAN UNIVERSITY, CLARK KERR, WHO WAS ASSASSINATED BY TERRORISTS SOME YEARS AGO.)

AND I WAS HOSTED ON OUR VISIT BY RALPH AND FLORENCE GALLOWAY, WHO WORKED FOR FORTY YEARS IN CENTRAL AFRICA. HE AS A PASTOR AND LINGUIST WHO SPENT HIS LIFE DEVELOPING WRITTEN LANGUAGE FOR TRIBAL PEOPLE WHOSE DIALECT WAS ONLY

SPOKEN AND WHO THEREFORE HAD NO WAY TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD. SHE, A PUBLIC HEALTH NURSE, SPECIALIZING IN FAMILY PLANNING AND WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH ISSUES. THEY WERE PROUD OF THEIR FIRST REFRIGERATOR AND A COMPUTER.

AND I ATE DINNER WITH OLD FRIENDS, DR. AND MRS. NORVAL CHRISTY; HE AN EYE SURGEON, SHE HIS NURSE AND SURGICAL ASSISTANT. AT THE PRESBYTERIAN HOSPITAL IN TAXILA, PAKISTAN, DR. AND MRS. CHRISTY DEVELOPED CATARACT SURGERY TECHNIQUES THAT ALLOWED THEIR TEAM OF PAKISTANIS TO DO 150 CATARACT OPERATIONS A DAY, EVERY DAY. PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER

THE WORLD CAME TO WATCH AND LEARN.

"WHAT'S GOING ON IN TAXILA THESE DAYS?" I ASKED. DR. CHRISTY DOESN'T TALK MUCH. "THEY DO IT NOW," HE SAID. "WHO?" I ASKED. "THEY DO, MY PAKISTANI DOCTORS. I TRAINED SEVEN OF THEM AND THEY ARE EXPANDING THE CLINIC." "CHRISTIANS" I ASKED. "YES, ALL SEVEN."

I'M A PRESBYTERIAN BECAUSE I LOVE THIS FAMILY AND WHAT IT MEANS AND DOES. IN BERUIT, PAKISTAN AND ZAIRE ... IN GREAT AMERICAN CHURCHES LIKE NASSAU PRESBYTERIAN IN PRINCETON, FIFTH AVENUE IN NEW YORK, PEACH TREE IN ATLANTA, IN VALLEY CHURCH IN SCOTTSDALE, IN PHILADELPHIA, PITTSBURGH, CLEVELAND,

DENVER, DALLAS, SEATTLE, SAN FRANCISCO, CHICAGO -- LARGE, FAITHFUL, ROBUST, LIVELY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES IN THE CITY; MORE THAN 11,000 CONGREGATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES. AND HERE IN CHICAGO AT 64TH AND KIMBARK, FIRST PRESBYTERIAN, AND SECOND CHURCH AT MICHIGAN AND 20TH; 130 CONGREGATIONS IN AND AROUND THE CITY, A NEW CONGREGATION IN HOFFMAN ESTATES, A STORE FRONT IN HUMBOLT PARK; THE CENTER FOR WHOLE LIFE IN CABRINI-GREEN, AND CHILDREN TUTORED AND HOUSES BUILT AND HOMELESS FED.

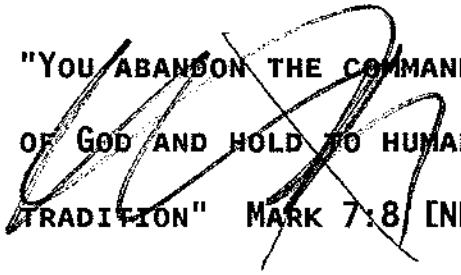
(ADD LOCAL SCOTTSDALE MINISTRIES HERE)

GOD'S LOVE EXPRESSED IN THE WORLD BY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES AND INDIVIDUAL PRESBYTERIAN CHRISTIANS.

ONE TIME JESUS WAS TALKING TO A GROUP OF PHARISEES AND SCRIBES AND THEY ASKED HIM WHY HE SEEMED TO HANDLE THE TRADITION -- THE LAW -- A LITTLE LOOSELY. AND HE SAID: "YOU LEAVE THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD, AND HOLD FAST HUMAN TRADITION." THE DANGER, OF COURSE, IS ALWAYS THAT THE TRADITION WILL REPLACE FAITHFULNESS TO GOD. THE STRENGTH AND THE GLORY OF PRESBYTERIANS IS PRECISELY THAT WE NEVER SUGGEST THAT ABOUT OURSELVES, AND ALWAYS SEE OUR TRADITION

AS A MEANS ONLY OF BEING GOD'S FAITHFUL PEOPLE IN THE WORLD.

NO ONE PUTS NEW WINE IN OLD WINESKINS, JESUS ONCE SAID. IT IS SURELY THE CLEAREST THING HE EVER SAID. NO TRADITION SURVIVES WHICH DOES NOT ALWAYS SEEK NEW WAYS TO BE EXPRESSED AND CELEBRATED.



"YOU ABANDON THE COMMANDMENT OF GOD AND HOLD TO HUMAN TRADITION" MARK 7:8 [NRSV]

T. S. ELIOT WROTE AN ESSAY ABOUT TRADITION ONCE IN WHICH HE SAID THAT:

"TRADITION IS NOT SOMETHING YOU INHERIT . . IF YOU WANT TRADITION YOU MUST OBTAIN IT WITH GREAT LABOR. YOU MUST OBTAIN IT WITH INTELLECTUAL TOIL, EXISTENTIAL ENGAGEMENT, CONTESTATION AND INTERROGATION." [SEE CORNELL WEST IN CRITERION, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO DIVINITY SCHOOL, SPRING/SUMMER, 1994]

THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO BE FAITHFUL. THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO RESPOND TO CHRIST'S CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP. PRESBYTERIANISM IS ONE, NOT THE ONLY ONE. BUT IT IS OURS, YOURS AND MINE FOR

A WHILE: TO ENJOY, CELEBRATE, AND EMPLOY IN THE WAY WE WORK OUT OUR OWN VOCATIONS. AND, ALONG WITH ALL THE OTHER UNIQUE CHURCH TRADITIONS, THIS ONE, I THINK, IS TO BE APPRECIATED AND RESPECTED. IT IS A GIFT TO US TO BE HANDED ON TO OTHERS, GENERATION TO GENERATION. AMEN.